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ABSTRACT

The establishment and direction of discussion groups, using tapes as a reference and vocabulary guide, in a sixth-grade class having a previous preparation of two years of daily French instruction are described. Grouping by fluency, choice of group leaders, and the discovery of problems and solutions through the eyes of group leaders are also covered. (AF)

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Discussion Groups in the Foreign Language Elementary Classroom

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GROUPING OFFERS an excellent opportunity for the individual to express himself more often. It also provides a challenge for the more gifted students and security for the less able. Therefore, in order to further individualize class experience and to challenge and improve their fluency in French, I began a discussion group project in sixth grade.

The sixth graders had had two years of daily conversational French which included the learning of various dialogues. I felt now that they needed to test and improve their fluency in a situation which goes beyond that of ordinary dialogue memorization. Class discussions were held previously in French but the twenty-minute period in the French room limits this opportunity for the individual in a large class.

The students were grouped according to their fluency level. Groups were kept small, consisting of four students and a group leader. The use of tapes as a reference and guide for vocabulary, questions and ideas was invaluable as an aid to the leader and group members. Each group had the use of a tape recorder. In formulating the tapes, the subjects of discussion were chosen for interest and developed within the framework of vocabulary familiar to the students. To further expand their comprehension and fluency, the familiar vocabulary was put into different contexts on the tapes. The tapes consisted of possible questions to ask and answers to expect in discussing a picture, or to use in storytelling based on a picture or bulletin board scenes. Suggested ideas and directions also were included. The tapes were entirely in French with the exception of directions.

In preparing the class for this study, all pertinent constructions and vocabulary to be used were reviewed. On several previous occasions, class discussions were held as practice sessions for this technique. Emphasis was made on students' voluntary contribution of ideas or thoughts. The "why" type of question was particularly effective in eliciting responses. In discussing the purpose of the study with the

class, that of increasing their fluency, a rule was made that only French was to be the language spoken at any time in group discussions.

Group leaders spent two class periods listening to tapes designated for their groups. This insured their knowledge as to the questions to ask, vocabulary to be used and suggestions for topics to be discussed.

The groups met independently although I remained in the room and was available to answer any imperative questions. From time to time, I observed each group and recorded parts of their discussions, gathering information to be used later as part of my evaluation. After class periods, leaders met with me to share questions and problems that may have arisen during class. After groups had met consistently for seven periods, each group gave a presentation before the whole class, sample discussions, creative skits, and like activities.

The most important results of this project were the enthusiasm and participation of the class in their group meetings. Group leaders demonstrated a willingness to solve their own problems.

Examples are given below showing some of the problems encountered. In the early days of the study, the effectiveness of use of the tapes was observable. The questions and answers to be used were of primary concern to the leaders. A frequent procedure in this stage was for the leaders to act as teachers in a question and answer type of session.

Here is a sample of a group sharing period:

A; "___ keeps on fooling around in my group. He keeps making jokes in French. What shall I do?"
B; "Well, it's in French isn't it? This is supposed to be fun, isn't it?"
C; "My group doesn't say much."
A; "Do they know the answers to the questions?"
B; "Use the tape recorder. I let my group listen to it when they don't know the answers. I make them listen and repeat."
C; "I'll try that tomorrow."
A; "___ was absent. He didn't know what we were doing so I let him use the tape recorder to listen to."
B; "I used the tape recorder today because I forgot what question to ask next."

When the group has listened to the tape recorder but is still passive, what happens then? What if several members are not contributing? Thus, concern for the individuals of the group and how to provide for them became primary at this stage.

A; "Well, most of my group know the answers but there are one or two who don't say anything and what shall I do?"
C; "Call on them. Or were they absent?"

A; "No, and they've already listened to the tape recorder. They just don't seem to respond very well."

B; "I had that same problem in my group. ____ is shy and was afraid of making a mistake. I let him and his friend who is in the group ask each other questions as partners for a while. I did it to give ____ confidence and to help him out. If he can't remember the questions on tape, I let him ask any questions in French that he knows. As long as it's French, it's OK."

C; "I did something like that today. Each one asked questions of any one in the group."

Here is a different sort of problem. This would occur in the advanced stage of the study. It happened sooner, of course, in groups of students with advanced ability.

A; "My group contributes fine. In fact all the time. They even argue. Several members want to talk all the time. What should I do?"

B; "Make them raise their hands when they want to talk. Take turns."

C; "Do we have to follow exactly what is on the tape? We asked all kinds of questions today. They were kind of silly ones but we had to think for good answers."

D; "Can we take copies of the pictures home to study for homework?"

Best results seemed to come from groups where all members took part freely. In these groups, discussion was balanced and talk was lively when I observed them. The leader acted as a moderator only. Leaders often asked how to start discussion.

A; "How do you get your group to discuss? My group answers questions all right but they don't seem to contribute really. What can I do?"

B; "Let them take a copy of the picture home and study it. Then when they return to class, they will have several questions and answers or things to say about it. They're prepared."

C; "I let my group members take turns asking questions of anybody in the group especially the 'why' question."

D; "That's the question that got our group discussion started. Wow! Then they all talked at once! They disagreed on the answer, and I couldn't quiet them enough to take turns."

C; "Could we use some imaginative type of questions? Like imagine a situation and I describe it, and ask them what they would do, or what the character might do next?"

A; "Why not! Let's try it!"

The study seemed to follow a pattern. Beginning with concern over vocabulary, leaders progressed to concern for individual participation, then to real discussion and contribution of the group as a whole. For good results, I also found that the selection of leaders was important. Either by reasons of personality, ability, or level of the group, such leaders will not need to dominate the discussion. Good discussions

came from not only the groups of very able students but also the less able students. Teamwork is the note here. Adequate preparation not only in vocabulary but also as to how to elicit a discussion is a factor.

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